SF Examiner OCT 10 19

Theory triggers probe

Did lawmen set up King?

Wayne Chastain is a veteran newsman who, while writing for the Memphis Press-Scimitar, was one of the first reporters on the scene after Martin Luther King Jr. was shot. He has investigated the King murder for eight years.

By Wayne Chastain
Pacific News Service

MEMPHIS — Martin Luther King Jr. may have been the victim of "security stripping" — a technique used by intelligence agencies to expose a victim to assassination by removing his protection.

This theory persuaded the U.S. House of Representatives to create a special 12-member committee to investigate both the 1968 King murder and the 1963 assassination of John Kennedy.

The Black Caucus in the House, acting on new information inthe King case, was responsible for breaking a stalemate and pushing the investigation through, according to several committee appointees.

The new information was given to the Black Caucus by two investigators: Mark Lane, author of the best-selling book on the JFK assassination, "Rush to Judgment," and Abby Mann, an Academy Award-winning screenwriter and author of "Judgment in Nuremburg."

They and Newsday reporter Les Payne found in scores of interviews with those involved in the King investigation that:

Ed Redditt, the black Memphis police detective in charge of protecting King, was removed from his post across the street from the motel where King was shot just two hours before the slaying. Redditt said he had set up a contingency plan to seal off the area in the event of violence, "but it was never implemented."

The director of the police department, Frank Holloman — a former FBI agent of 25 years who had worked with J. Edgar Hoover — told Redditt he was being removed because a murder plot against him had been discovered. After being taken home and watched by Memphis police for two days, he was put back on duty. He never heard another word about the murder plot.

Holloman told him of the plot in the company of a man he identified as a Secret Service agent, so Redditt assumed "that Holloman had gotten this information from the Secret Service.' But that agency denies having any record of sending an agent to the meeting.

But representatives from the FBI, military intelligence, National Guard and other agencies were there.

- Redditt's assistant told investigator Mark Lane that he, too, had left the command post opposite King's hotel before the slaying, but refused to discuss the circumstances of his removal.

- An informal security force of four members of a local black militant group, including one undercover Memphis police agent, also was relieved from duty just before the murder, by someone in the King entourage. Stationed with arms on the same floor as King, they were already downstairs when the shooting took place.

- The only two black firemen assigned to the fire station across from King's hotel, Redditt's command post, were also "stripped away."

Both were transferred temporarily to other stations the night before the murder. One, Floyd Newsum, said the deputy chief of the Fire Department told him the transfer order had come from the Police Department.

- According to Redditt, "The FBI never talked to me about this even though I told my story to anyone willing to answer." Newsum also says he has never been questioned by a law enforcement agency about his removal.

- Arthur Murtagh, a former FBI agent in Atlanta, has said agents in the Atlanta office "literally jumped for joy" when they learned King had been assassinated. He said the FBI intelligence squad in Atlanta (King's hometown) was assigned "to somehow or other get King, to bring him down, break him or destroy him."

After the murder, Lane says, the same Atlanta intelligence squad was assigned by Hoover to head the investigation. "My superiors, both in the Atlanta bureau and Washington," Murtagh said, "washed out leads suggesting a right-wing conspiracy.

"Had a more thorough investigation been conducted by the FBI, I believe links would have been established between the King assassination and the Kennedy murders — both those of JFK and RFK."

Redditt says he learned after the assassination that the Memphis police had heavily infiltrated a black militant organization called the Invaders that was directly responsible for King's return to Memphis. Payne has reported that police and FBI informants may have played a part in the violence.

The Invaders had organized the disruption of a Memphis march led by King a week earlier, touching off a riot that killed one, injured scores and led to 228 arrests. After the violence, apparently intended by the militant group to discredit him, King vowed to return to prove that he could still lead a peaceful demonstration.

"Dr. King would never have returned to Memphis if the violence had not happened," says the Rev. Jesse Jackson, a key King aide. "We never intended to get bogged down in Memphis."

According to a former leader of the Invaders, a Memphis policeman who had infiltrated the group "was one of the most provocative members of the Invaders," very active in planning confrontations.

That undercover agent, according to both Newsday and Redditt, was one of the four Invaders in the informal security force for King, created by an agreement between King's staff and the Invaders on his return trip to Memphis.

"He left the police department shortly after that," Redditt said, "and the word was that he went to Washington, D.C. Then a couple of years after the King slaying I ran face to face with him in downtown Memphis. He was wearing a disguise."

Redditt stopped him. At first the man pretended he was someone else, but finally acknowledged he was the man Redditt thought he was.

"He acted very mysterious, saying that he was now with the Central Intelligence Agency, and begged me not to blow his cover," according to Redditt.